

A Journey with Christ Through the Future

Numbers and Symbols?

Revelation 21:1-27

INTRODUCTION:

We have been going through the groundwork of learning how to read and interpret Revelation. This will set us up for the time when we actually start going through the scriptures and try to determine exactly what John was trying to say when he wrote the book to the seven churches. The ultimate goal is not to try to use the book as a means of putting all of the end time events into chronological order as is the goal of many people today. Instead I want to understand what Jesus, through John, is trying to teach us **so we can be transformed by it!**

This morning we are going to look at symbols, numbers, and colors and examine how they are to be interpreted in symbolic language.

All Stand and Read Scripture

Revelation 21:3-4 (NASB)

³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be among them, ⁴ and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be *any* death; there will no longer be *any* mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

Prayer

I. SYMBOLS

Symbols are a part of everyday life. We frequently understand and accept them, usually without even thinking about them. Some symbols picture what they represent, while others don't, or they may do so rather obscurely. If we hear on the news "The White House said today..." A visitor from another country, upon hearing the report, may get stuck on the symbol, instead of moving beyond the symbol to what it means. Why? Context is missing.

We need to avoid making the mistake of getting stuck on the symbols and failing to move on to the true meanings when we read Revelation. Many take the symbols literally: a literal beast; a literal battle of Armageddon; and a literal thousand-year period. Very few, however, would think of Jesus as a literal seven-horned and seven-eyed Lamb. They would know that symbols are being used and that those symbols point to a deeper reality.

Symbols consist of creatures such as a lion, lamb, eagle, dragon, horses, scorpions, locusts, etc. as well as body parts like horns, wings, feet, head, forehead, etc.

Pieces of furniture or household items like thrones, lamps, lampstands, keys, bowls, trumpets, etc.

Objects like the sun, moon, stars, hills, islands, mountains, desert, etc.

Precious minerals and jewels, clothing, food, and references to cities.

Scriptures, from both Old and New Testament, often provide the meaning of the symbol. Although not all symbols retain the same meaning throughout scripture, we can use the provided meanings as a starting point for their interpretation.

We will talk about their meanings as we go through the Book of Revelation.

The symbols are often coupled with numbers and colors to expand on the description and their meaning.

II. NUMBERS AND COLORS.

John also uses numbers and colors as symbols. When he is speaking in a symbolic language, the numbers must be used as symbols instead of mere units of measurement.

Instead of the interpreting the number seven as a literal number, we are to associate the symbolic meaning to the number for the interpretation.

TWO

The number **TWO** is associated with witness or testimony. It is probably derived from the Old Testament law.

Deuteronomy 19:15 (NASB)

¹⁵ “A single witness shall not rise up against a man on account of any iniquity or any sin which he has committed; on the evidence of two or three witnesses a matter shall be confirmed.

Revelation 11:3-4 (NASB)

³ And I will grant *authority* to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for twelve hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth.” ⁴ These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands that stand before the Lord of the earth.

THREE

Three is often associated the **trinity of the divine** (God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit) as well as the **unholy**. It signifies fullness or completeness.

Revelation 16:13-14 (NASB)

¹³ And I saw *coming* out of the mouth of the dragon and out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet, three unclean spirits like frogs; ¹⁴ for they are spirits of demons, performing signs, which go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them together for the war of the great day of God, the Almighty.

FOUR

Four emphasizes **totality** and possibly derives from the image of the four points of a compass. A good example is found in

Revelation 7:1-4 (NASB)

7 After this I saw four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth, so that no wind would blow on the earth or on the sea or on any tree. ² And I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, having the seal of the living God; and he cried out with a loud voice to the four angels to whom it was granted to harm the earth and the sea, ³ saying, "Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees until we have sealed the bond-servants of our God on their foreheads."

You will also find occurrences with the numbers where the number is not used, but something will be described using that amount of references. An example of this for the number four is...

Revelation 5:9 (NASB)

⁹ And they *sang a new song, saying,

"Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood *men* from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

What John tells us symbolically is that Jesus purchased us through his blood spilt on the cross and that His death was for all mankind. It is no accident that he used four references: (**every tribe and tongue and people and nation**). These four references emphasizes the totality of mankind. Christ died for all!

SEVEN

Seven is the most often used number in Revelation. It is filled with sevens. The number seven is associated with **completeness**. We see this number and it's reference to completion as early as the second chapter of Genesis.

Genesis 2:1-3 (NASB)

2 Thus the heavens and the earth were completed, and all their hosts. ² By the seventh day God completed His work which He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done. ³ Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made.

We also learned a couple of weeks ago that seven is interwoven throughout the book of Revelation. John gave seven blessings that would occur to someone who obeys what is written in the words of his prophecy.

Revelation 1:3 (NASB)

³ Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.

What is inferred by this is that the Christian is **completely blessed by God** when we remain faithful to Him.

TEN

Ten and multiples of ten (1,000 and "thousands and thousands") are found, often in **association with evil**. The reference to the saints reigning 1,000 years is the one place where the number is used in connection with Christ and His people. Perhaps the number goes back to the Old Testament in such passages as the ten plagues and the ten commandments in Exodus.

TWELVE

Twelve and its multiples (24, 12,000, and 144,000) are essentially the number for the **people of God**.

Revelation 4:4 (NASB)

⁴ Around the throne were twenty-four thrones; and upon the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white garments, and golden crowns on their heads.

The 24 elders are generally interpreted as the representatives of the chosen people of God under both the old and the new covenants. This would symbolize the twelve tribes of Israel for the people of God in the old covenant and the twelve apostles for the people of God in the new covenant.

666

The number 666 in Revelation 13 has received a lot of attention and for good reason.

Revelation 13:14-18 (NASB)

*¹⁴ And he deceives those who dwell on the earth because of the signs which it was given him to perform in the presence of the beast, telling those who dwell on the earth to make an image to the beast who *had the wound of the sword and has come to life. ¹⁵ And it was given to him to give breath to the image of the beast, so that the image of the beast would even speak and cause as many as do not worship the image of the beast to be killed. ¹⁶ And he causes all, **the small and the great, and the rich and the poor, and the free men and the slaves**, to be given a mark on their right hand or on their forehead, ¹⁷ and he provides that no one will be able to buy or to sell, except the one who has the mark, either the name of the beast or the number of his name. ¹⁸ Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for the number is that of a man; and his number is **six hundred and sixty-six**.*

Some believe this references a specific emperor (such as Nero or Domitian) while others see the number in contrast to seven, falling one short of completeness. Perhaps the threefold six emphasizes how completely evil the beast is. What really matters is not the precise identification but the ability of Christians to discern evil, no matter what form it takes.

Colors are also used with the symbols and numbers.

White usually refers to purity. Sometimes it will be used for evil imitating purity.

Black symbolizes judgment, distress, or disaster.

Red makes reference to violence, doom, and blood.

Green (or Pale) is associated with death.

Purple and Scarlet are associated with the splendor of evil in its wickedness.

III. HOW TO INTERPRET.

We attempt to communicate our emotions to each other by using symbols in our everyday language. When we are frustrated with someone, we may say, "I have told you a thousand times to leave me alone!" Was the person told, literally, a thousand times to "leave me alone"?

No! The number 1,000 is not meant to be measured...but weighed.

Let's look at a biblical example where Peter asks Jesus a question.

Matthew 18:22 (NASB)

21 Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?"

22 Jesus *said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.

So if a person sins against you the four hundred and ninety first time, does that mean you do not have to forgive them?

No! The number is not meant to be measured...but weighed.

What does this mean? When we come across numbers in our world today, we immediately measure the numbers. 9-1-1 is a three-digit telephone number that can be used any time, day or night, for police, fire and/or emergency medical services. 9-1-1 saves valuable time in an emergency.

When we see 9/11 (Nine Slash Eleven) we instinctively use them to identify a specific month and day (September 11th) for a given year.

These numbers, however, have transformed in America to something that goes beyond measurement and into the realm of "weighing" the numbers. When we hear "**911**" our minds are immediately directed toward the events at the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001. The September 11 attacks were a series of four coordinated terrorist attacks by the Islamic terrorist group al-Qaeda on the United States. The attacks killed 2,996 people, injured over 6,000 others, and caused at least \$10 billion in infrastructure and property damage. This is a phrase of our day. A thousand years from now, it would not make sense to the readers. The bombing of Pearl Harbor did not happen that long ago, yet most people today would not be able to tell you that it occurred on December 7, 1941.

Now to suggest that 9/11 merely measures a date and does not give a weight to the event as a symbol of death, suffering, and national security would be to lose the significance of the numbers altogether.

Likewise, the audience of Revelation, due to the common practice of weighing numbers, would first weigh the numbers before ever thinking of measuring them.

A good example of the mistake in taking the numbers used in Revelation literally is found in the interpretation of Revelation 7 by the Jehovah's Witnesses. From this text, the

Jehovah's Witnesses claim that the Bible teaches that there will **only** be 144,000 people allowed in the realm of heaven with God. The misinterpretation occurs when this number is measured instead of weighed. When the Old Testament background is allowed to interpret the text, the number 12 is seen to symbolize completeness. (Especially in regards to God's people: the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 disciples, etc.).

When 12 (completeness) is multiplied by 12 (completeness), we receive 144, which when weighed would symbolize "complete completeness". In order to get 144,000, John multiplies the complete completeness by 1,000, which is symbolized of a vast number of completeness and is commonly associated with God's vast sovereignty. The number 144,000 symbolizes the complete completeness of God's people under the direction of His sovereignty.

2 Peter 3:8 (NASB)

8 But do not let this one fact escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day.

Psalm 90:4a (NASB)

4 For a thousand years in Your sight Are like yesterday when it passes by,

Each day of our lives seems like a long time as we are experiencing it. However, when we look back on our lives our time on earth takes on a different perspective. Our life is viewed as a whole seems very, very, short.

God is not bound by time and space.

Numbers, then, are used by the author to communicate realities and truths on an emotional and symbolic level, which allows his message to transcend our language.

Let's answer another question. Why write to Laodicea and not Hierapolis and Colossae? We have a church in Colossae, do we not? How do we know? Because Paul wrote the book of Colossians to them. So why didn't John write to Colossae? Or why didn't he just add the other two? Why didn't he add the other two cities. Why not go up to nine churches?

The answer could be that they were passed along and read by all of the churches, but the number is more important than just listing all of the places. The seven would suggest that the book was to be read by the "complete" church.

CONCLUSION:

The symbols, numbers, and colors may be confusing. But the message to be learned is simple. You must be prepared for Christ's second coming.

You must be washed by the blood of the Lamb and remain faithful. Then your name will be found in the Lamb's Book of Life and you are promised that you will live in the presence of God eternally. **"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."** What a day that will be!

He is Lord!